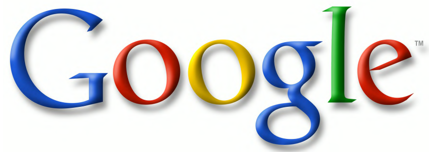


This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

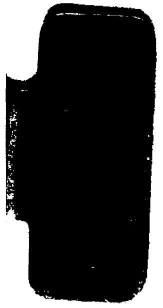
We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at http://books.google.com/

Digitized by Google



Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

155

The Church

and

The Stage

BY

WILLIAM HENRY HUDSON

LONDON
TRÜBNER & CO., LUDGATE HILL
1886

One Shilling]

3960

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

THE

CHURCH AND THE STAGE

BY

WILLIAM HENRY HUDSON

Das Theater hat oft einen Streit mit der Kanzel gehabt; sie sollten, dünkt mich, nicht mit einander habern.

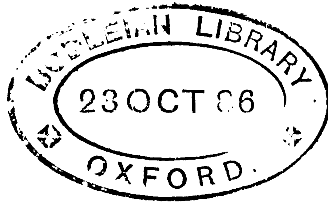
Goethe, Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre. Bk. 1, chap. xvi.

LONDON
TRÜBNER & CO., LUDGATE HILL
1886

[*All rights reserved*]

39691. e. 8.

Digitized by Google


BODLEIAN LIBRARY
23 OCT 86
OXFORD

Ballantyne Press
BALLANTYNE, HANSON AND CO.
EDINBURGH AND LONDON

Digitized by Google

THE CHURCH AND THE STAGE.

I.

PARENT AND CHILD.

So much has already been written on the relations of the Church and the Stage that, in venturing to add another word to the literature of the controversy, I may be accused of telling "a thrice-told tale." My excuse for writing these pages—if excuse be needed—must be my belief that the method here pursued presents the subject from a somewhat new point of view. The study of the past always throws light upon the problems of the present; and, therefore, while the most prominent thinkers in religion and philosophy, in politics and science, are busy revising the labours of past ages, recalling old judgments and passing fresh condemnations, it may be neither uninteresting nor unprofitable for us to re-read the history of the long conflict between the Church and the Stage.

The atmosphere of the time has long been charged with this controversy. So often and so persistently have the claims of the opposing parties been set over

Digitized by Google

against each other—so much have we heard of Church *versus* Stage, of priests *versus* players; that most of us have grown up in the belief that the *casus belli* is not accidental but essential; that there is something inherent in the natures of the two institutions which necessarily forces them into the position of rivals and adversaries. Nor, if we consult recent history, do we find ground to modify these conceptions. Religion and the Drama have long been estranged; and both Religion and the Drama have accepted that estrangement as though there were something in the nature of things which renders it unavoidable. Hence the long and bitter feud between them, with some phases of which nearly all of us are familiar; hence that spirit of mutual hatred, which has proved so disastrous to each of them, and to society at large. Denunciation on the one side has been met by raillery on the other; warnings have been answered by jests, and anathemas by ridicule. In the midst of all this confusion of angry words and heated recriminations, it is not suprising that so few should have remained clear-sighted and cool-headed enough to appreciate the real bearings of the controversy; that so few should have realised how misconceptions of first principles were leading the disputants fatally astray. Nor can we marvel that one who, like most of the busy men and women around us, simply accepts things as he finds them, and troubles little about their whence and their whither, should be led to believe that the feud of which he has heard so much has existed from the beginning, and can only cease with the ex-

Digitized by Google

tinction of the Theatre or the downfall of the Church.

We need not, however, go very deeply into the matter to discover how far this common supposition is from the truth. Religion and the Drama have not always stood with daggers drawn; but, on the contrary, Religion, which had before given birth to the Drama of the old world, was the mother also of the Drama of the new. It was under her direct inspiration that the modern Drama came into existence. Incredible as it may appear to many to-day, it is nevertheless a fact that the church was the first theatre, the altar the first stage, the priests the first actors, the mass the first play. The modern European Drama, in a word, is the immediate offspring of the Church.*

Rightly to understand the primitive relations of Religion and the Drama, we must be careful to remove from our minds many of the ideas which are inseparably bound up with the word church at the present day. With us a church is essentially a place of worship —a building consecrated entirely to the services of religion. In the Middle Ages it was far otherwise. Then a church was the centre not only of the religious life of the surrounding country, but also of its intellectual

* I have not here the space necessary to go into the much-vexed question of how far theatrical exhibitions, during the Middle Ages, were indebted to surviving remnants of the old Roman stage. Much learning and ingenuity have been expended on this point; but after all, it does not much concern us here. Whether the mediæval theatre was essentially a new growth, or whether it was in large measure a revival, under new conditions, of the drama of antiquity, the statement in the text is still true: the impulse came directly from the Church.

Digitized by Google

and social life; then it was not a building devoted exclusively to the purposes of prayer and praise, but was to a large extent the very home of the people. Lacking all the many agencies of social activity to which we are accustomed, deprived of nearly all that makes life agreeable to us to-day, carrying on at best a hard and precarious existence; the large mass of men and women, ignorant and degraded as they were, had need of a powerful comforter and friend; and the Church of mediæval Europe presented itself to supply all that was lacking of pleasure, of comfort, of refinement and culture, in the secular life of the time. Thus the Church filled a far larger place in life than it fills now or can ever fill again. It represented all that we understand by home, club, public hall, place of amusement. Religion did not then undertake to deal only with the relatively small part of men's lives with which she is now concerned; she took charge of the whole. She was the practical mistress of this life, as well as the guide to the life to come; she embraced the whole of existence, catering not only for the spiritual welfare of men, but also for their moral growth, their intellectual development, their æsthetic culture. As Michelet says, "The Church was the domicile of the people. . . . It was the universal refuge; the whole social life of the people was shut within its walls."

The Church was not slow to recognise the responsibilities of its position. To its desire to retain and to strengthen its hold upon the masses of the people may be attributed many of those elaborations in its

Digitized by Google

services which were indeed direct concessions to the popular love of excitement and the spectacular. The people remained pagan at heart, and the Church only kept their loyalty by gratifying their desires. Ecclesiastical *fêtes* in course of time became more and more numerous; processions in honour of saints and martyrs yearly received increasing attention. These, indeed, were developments of the merely external ceremonies of the Church. But they were not without parallels in the development of its internal ceremonies. Though acting more slowly, the same causes were here, too, producing similar effects. As time went on, a change took place in the actual services of the Church, which was fraught with the most pregnant results.

Even in its earliest form the Church liturgy contained certain germs of dramatic action; and these germs began to expand as soon as the austere asceticism of early ages had been outgrown, and Christianity had conquered the pagan system by a series of important concessions to the pagan spirit. Mr. Ward* has shown that in the ordinary mass we have the elements of a drama "in part pantomimically presented, in part aided by both epical and lyrical elements." There is the action of the officiating priest; there are the portions of Scripture narrative read to the congregation; there is the accompaniment of vocal and instrumental music. A complete blending of these three elements—a blending by which the epical should become fused with the lyrical and spectacular

* *History of English Dramatic Literature*, i. 19.

Digitized by Google

—alone was required to initiate a representation to which the term *dramatic* might without strain of meaning be applied.

These germs of dramatic action, however, remained undeveloped until the end of the tenth century. About that time there passed over many parts of Europe a wave of enthusiasm which may perhaps be best described by the much-abused word, revival. Religious services became increasingly popular; a fondness for ecclesiastical *fêtes* and ceremonies spread rapidly among all classes; while the warm faith of the people began to seek expression in their church architecture. Touched by the influences which awakened literature and art to renewed life, the Church ritual began suddenly to expand; and with this expansion the dramatic elements of the mass assumed more definite form, and passed rapidly into what is known as the liturgical mystery.

The first important step in this direction was taken when the priests began to amplify the original texts of Scripture by making additions and interpolations of their own. At first these were very modest, and grew naturally out of the offices for the day; but when it once became recognised as customary to improve in this way upon the text, and it was realised how much variety could thus be given to a service, it was found that the system was capable of almost indefinite extension. In course of time it happened, therefore, that an elaborate dialogue was built up on the foundations thus laid; and by and by, instead of detached requests, or items of information, which

Digitized by Google

alone had been ventured upon in the first interpolations, there was exhibited the whole history of some great event, evolved by the different divisions of the choir by a process of question and answer. Take, as an example of one of these incipient dramas, the dialogue in which Mary Magdalene, in the course of a long cross-examination by the choir of angels, unfolds the story of the crucifixion and the resurrection.* After a chorus, the theme of which is the triumph of the risen Christ, the angels proceed to hold a conversation with Mary, in which, in reply to their questions, she goes, incident by incident, over the whole story. Adopting an antiphonic arrangement, like that which obtains in our churches to-day, one choir sang the angels' questions, the other Mary's replies. In this division we may trace the first germs of characterisation.

Meanwhile an important development was taking place in another portion of the service. On Palm Sunday it became customary to form a procession in which all the assistants carried branches and chanted "Hallelujah"—imitating, if not yet representing, the entry into Jerusalem. On Good Friday the priests, seated around the table, repeated the incidents of the Last Supper. During the evening service on the following day, all the candles were extinguished to simulate the darkness which spread over the world; while the rattling of iron and the blows of hammers were employed to betoken the noise of the earthquake

* This dialogue will be found in the original Latin in Edélestand du Méril's *Origines Latines du Théatre Moderne*, pp. 108–10.

Digitized by Google

and the rending of the veil. On Easter morning the musical service was distributed among different portions of the choir and congregation; and of the oratorio thus initiated, Bach's *Passion Music*, Rossini's *Stabat Mater*, and Handel's *Messiah*, are the direct descendants.

It is impossible to state with certainty when the epical part of the liturgy became so fused with the spectacular that one no longer merely explained and embellished the other, but they became integral parts of a united whole. There is reason to suppose that this fusion took place in the early part of the eleventh century; but it is hopeless to seek for chronological exactness on a point like this. When, however, this was finally accomplished—when the narrative of the liturgy had been embodied in dramatic form—there still remained to be taken the important step from the mere *representation* of characters to their *impersonation*. So far, the priests and choristers were only priests and choristers—singing the parts allotted to them, going through certain accompanying actions, but always remaining to themselves and to the spectators officials of the Church. It was with them as it is to-day with Mr. Santley when he takes part in *Elijah*. We listen to his superb dramatic singing without feeling that there is any want of keeping between the declamation of the prophet and the white tie and swallow-tailed coat of the singer, simply because Mr. Santley is still for us merely Mr. Santley and not Elijah. It was for a long while the same with the performers in the undeveloped liturgy-play. Their

Digitized by Google

individualities had yet to be merged in the individualities of the characters they were representing.

We cannot here do more than indicate in the briefest way the steps by which the important change from oratorio to drama was brought about.*

In its original form the liturgical mystery was intended simply to vividly recall an event, not to imitate it. The transition from the merely historic representation to an actual embodiment of Scriptural narrative was commenced when, to increase the impression produced, certain objects intimately connected with the story or the characters were brought before the spectators. An early instance of this is to be found in the drama of the *Shepherds*.† A cradle was exhibited on the altar, and beside it an image of the Virgin Mary; while one of the choir-boys was placed in some elevated position whence, as the angel, he might announce the birth of Jesus. A further step in advance may be traced in some of the Easter offices; as, for instance, in that of the church of Mont St. Michel. Here there are directions that the "brother who shall be God‡ (*Frater qui erit Deus*) shall have a white alb spotted as if with blood, a crown, a beard, and bare feet, and shall bear a cross."§ Similar directions are given for the clothing of the three women. In the same service, apart from this important step in the direction of characterisation, there is a better-defined distribution of parts; and

* The reader curious to pursue this subject will find the whole question of the liturgical mystery and its development dealt with at length in *Les Mystères*, by L. Petit de Julleville, vol. i., chap. ii.

† Du Méril, pp. 147–50. ‡ That is, Jesus. § Du Méril, pp. 94–6.

Digitized by Google

the priests, no longer distributed about the choir according only to the requirements of the service, are arranged with some regard to the necessities of the action.

By steps such as those here indicated, each in itself comparatively small and unimportant, but each, once taken, leading the way naturally and almost insensibly to still further advances in the same direction, the liturgical mystery developed within the services of the Church. In course of time the characters became more numerous; more life and movement were introduced into the action; further accessories were added to give reality to the scene; and the text of Scripture was more and more widely departed from—change in this direction being greatly aided by the gradual appearance of the vernacular dialect side by side with the ecclesiastical Latin. Thus within the mass itself, by a process of natural and spontaneous evolution, there grew up a religious drama having the church choir for its stage and the priests for its actors. As in ancient Greece, so here again in mediæval Europe, Religion had given birth to the histrionic art; for in these old ecclesiastical mysteries the historian of to-day finds the beginning of the modern Drama. Little as it may now bear traces of its origin, the Theatre of Europe is, therefore, the offspring of religious worship. Its cradle was upon the steps of the altar; and in the years of its struggling infancy it was nursed by ecclesiasticism and fostered by clerical care.

Digitized by Google

II.

THE FIRST MISUNDERSTANDINGS.

THE liturgical mystery could not of necessity long continue so closely bound up with the religious services from which it sprang. The same causes which had already given it definite form and character, continuing to act, in course of time brought about its complete separation from the Church ritual. The characters became so numerous, the decorations so elaborate, the representations so lengthy, that it could no longer continue to form an essential part of the mass. It was henceforth made an accompaniment of the service, not a portion of the service itself: the initial step was taken towards separation of Church and Stage.

This led the way for the first great change in the history of the English Theatre—the removal of the scene of action from the interior to the exterior of the building. The mystery was growing more and more popular; on *fête*-days immense crowds of people came together to witness the performance, causing great discomfort both to actors and to spectators in the relatively confined area of a church. A desire for what to-day would be called the evangelisation of

Digitized by Google

the masses, aided in prompting the more public performance of sacred plays; and when to these facts we add the further fact that some of the stricter among the clergy were beginning to look askance at the long elaborate performances which now took place within their sacred edifices, we have three of the principal reasons which prompted the bodily removal of the stage from the altar into the open air. These reasons were brought home to the clergy with increasing force by the rapid growth of public fairs, which were themselves connected with the festivals instituted by every great abbey and church on the anniversary of its patron saint. The clergy soon made a rule of holding specially elaborate services during these periods of festivity; and, among other attractions offered, it presently became customary on each such occasion to enact a religious play, which was usually founded upon some well-known incidents in the saint's career. The excitement caused by the large number of people who flocked together at such times, and the modified character of the performances given, rendered more and more apparent the difficulties, already recognised, of continuing to use the interior of churches for the representation of these long and attractive plays. Hence the stage was removed, first of all from the interior of the building to the porch; then from the porch into the churchyard; and finally from the precincts of the church altogether into the open fields and city streets.

The institution of the great ecclesiastical festival of *Corpus Christi* by Pope Urban IV. in 1264, exer-

Digitized by Google

cised a marked and permanent influence on the early drama, then vacillating between the altar and the street. To the firm establishment of this festival, half a century later, is undoubtedly due the introduction in well-defined form of those great cycles of miracle-plays which soon became popular in nearly all the large towns in England, and which mark the commencement of the Augustan age of our religious drama. It is true that these public performances did not altogether usurp the place of the time-honoured representations within the sacred walls; that for a time public and private exhibitions went on side by side; and that the occasional presentation of mysteries in churches may be read of up to the very end of the history of the religious drama in this country. But, practically speaking, the career of the liturgical mystery came to an end with the rise of the *Corpus Christi* plays towards the end of the thirteenth century.

It is important to notice that when the religious drama began to pass from the precincts of the church, it also began to pass out of the hands of the clergy. The introduction of a lay element among those engaged in its preparation or performance may, indeed, be traced back to the times when the mystery still formed part of the service out of which it had grown; for even then such characters as Judas Iscariot and the impenitent thief were intrusted to non-ecclesiastical performers—the peculiar sanctity of the clergy being held to unfit them for these "heavy" parts. But the change in the *personnel* of the cast thus initiated

Digitized by Google

went on slowly. Even when exhibitions in fields and streets first became popular, the clergy remained the principal actors; and they seem to have fought inch by inch for the ground which circumstances compelled them gradually to vacate. The lengthening and complication of the plays presented, however, necessitating an increase in the number of actors required, and making continually greater demands on the time and attention of those who assumed positions of responsibility, by and by rendered it impossible any longer to draw the whole of the performers exclusively from ecclesiastical ranks. The grafting of a comic element upon the more serious, and the rapid absorption of materials altogether foreign to the original purpose of the mysteries, aided also in bringing about the change referred to. Finally, clerical monopoly in the Drama was further broken down by the extension to purely lay communities of the custom of acting miracle-plays in honour of patron saints—a custom which, early commenced by schools and colleges, was in course of time adopted by the parish clerks of London, and afterwards by the great guilds or trading corporations all over England. The result was that, in due course, the clerical element in these dramatic exhibitions almost disappeared; remaining only in some of the more sacred characters, such as *Pater Cœlestis* and Christ, which, for obvious reasons, did not so soon pass entirely into unsanctified hands.

In this state of partial dependence upon, or at least union with, the Church, the English drama con-

Digitized by Google

tinued until the old mysteries began to fall into decay. Of the many subtle influences before which the religious drama gradually declined, it is no place here to speak. Suffice it to say that when, a century before the Reformation, men began to awake as from a long dream, the mysteries jarred with the new sentiments and aspirations which were beginning to take shape. The religious drama became an anachronism. It was the outgrowth and the expression of a phase of religious life which men were fast outgrowing; the moral and intellectual conditions from which it had drawn sustenance were passing silently away; the stream of civilisation was sweeping on where it could not follow. The Drama was touched by the secular spirit which began to permeate the whole of life. From the time when, long ago, the clergy had begun to relinquish their positions to actors and authors not connected with the Church, the force of circumstances, both within the Church and without it, had tended ever to widen the breach between the Drama and its parent institution. When the mysteries passed gradually away, leaving as their successors the moral plays and the first crude efforts towards a purely worldly drama to which these in their turn had given birth, when, in a word, the Drama yielded to the resistless influences of the time, and became secularised, that breach was made complete. Church and Stage had once and for all severed connection. Henceforth the course of time would only serve to efface every recollection of a common past which could still in any way tend to bind them together.

Digitized by Google

It was with the decay of the religious and the rise of a secular drama that ecclesiastical hostility to the Stage began to come prominently to the front. But it is not to this period that we have to look for the commencement of that hostility. To find the first traces of the long contest between the clerical power and the dramatic instinct, we must turn back over the pages of history to the time when the mystery-play was still in its infancy. As early as 1210 a proclamation was issued by Pope Innocent III. forbidding the clergy to take part in any dramatic representations within their churches; and papal prohibitions of this kind, renewed from time to time, combined with the other causes of which I have already spoken to bring about the removal of the religious drama from the altar to the street. So long as the spirit of opposition was merely exemplified by an occasional papal bull, however, it is clear that, so far from the rank and file of the clergy being adverse to the religious drama, they were somewhat too much inclined in its favour. It was, in fact, their fondness for these shows which necessitated from head-quarters an occasional reminder of the kind mentioned. But it was not long before, among the clergy themselves, there appeared distinct signs of hostility. The first far-off wave of that influence which was in the fulness of time to produce the Reformation, was already passing over the Church. A few bold thinkers, the lineal ancestors of the Puritans of whom hereafter we shall have a good deal to say, were already beginning to make their voices heard.

Digitized by Google

Men like the author of *Le Manuel de Péché*, who forbids a "clerk" even to witness, and still more to perform in a miracle-play, declaring the same to be a "sight of sin;" men like the author of *Piers Plowman's Crede*, who places the public representations of miracles in the same category as taverns and fairs, and condemns them all alike as improper places of resort; became mouthpieces for that feeling of opposition which was already arising among those of the clergy who were made of sterner stuff. The followers of John Wycliffe towards the end of the fourteenth century took up the war-cry in no uncertain manner. In Mr. Wright's *Reliquiæ Antiquæ* there is to be found the text of a sermon, filling some sixteen pages of that volume, the whole burden of which from beginning to end is the sin of miracle-playing. Irrelevant and childish as is much of the argument adduced, this sermon as a whole is shown by its straightforwardness of tone and boldness of statement to have been the protest of a man of no little power. A song given in the same work, and entitled "A Poem against the Friars and their Miracle-Plays," translates the sentiments of this sermon into somewhat more popular language. Throughout its seven verses there is traceable a most cordial hatred of the friars and their dramatic representations, which fairly reaches its climax in the last verse but one; in which, in a strain which does infinitely more credit to his zeal than to his Christian spirit, the unknown poet prophesies the final burning up of the friars and their assistants, and expresses a devout wish that he may be there to see!

Digitized by Google

Men of these pronounced views were, however, in advance of their time. The large mass of the clergy were loth to give up a species of exhibition in which it would appear they had found not a little enjoyment, and which undoubtedly had brought them a good deal of popularity. Hence, as time went on, it was no uncommon thing for bishops to find it needful to exercise their authority against the representations of scriptural plays within, or in the neighbourhood of, the churches under their control. According to Warton there is to be found in the Register of the Bishopric of Winchester for the year 1384 an episcopal injunction of one William of Wykeham, the then bishop, against the exhibition of *spectacula* in the cemetery of his cathedral; and other instances of like kind are given by the same indefatigable antiquary. How persistent, however, in the face of authoritative inhibitions and scathing denunciations, was the inkling of many among the clergy after the forbidden pleasures, is proved by facts of much more recent date. As late as the year 1511, Dean Colet, in an *Oratio ad Clerum* delivered before the Convocation of St. Paul, found it necessary to call upon the heads of the Church to enforce the laws and regulations forbidding the clergy to become *publici lusores*—common players. A few years later we find Cardinal Wolsey, in the regulations of the Canons Regular of St. Austin, ordering that the brothers should not be *lusores*. And in the middle of the sixteenth century Bishop Bonner issued a proclamation to the clergy of his diocese prohibiting "all manner of common plays, games, or interludes to be

Digitized by Google

played, set forth, or declared within their churches and chapels." *

Cases such as these here given, and others of like signification which might be added, must be regarded as pointing to persistent survivals of customs which were nevertheless passing surely away. Old habits always die hard; and after its long tenure of life and popularity the English religious drama did not yield up the ghost without a desperate struggle. But in spite of here and there a spasmodic effort, examples of which are to be found long after the Reformation, its power and influence waned year by year as the impulses of life veered round from the theological to the secular. Yielding to the new influences which that change brought with it, the Drama at length broke entirely away from the dominion of the Church. It had long been falling more and more under purely secular control; it had long begun rapidly to outrun the purposes for which it had been intended. Little by little it had become estranged from its original patrons, the clergy; and even before it had wholly given up its dogmatic and didactic leanings, the breach between Theatre and Church was virtually complete. Willingly or unwillingly the clergy had at length to acknowledge the independence of their rebellious nursling. So long as the Drama had remained expressly religious or moral in its aims—so long as it had admittedly sought to follow the footsteps of the Church—so long as it had been content to be mainly the echo of the pulpit; some bond of sympathy, however slight, must

* Collier's *History of English Dramatic Poetry*, ii. 72, 73.

Digitized by Google

have continued to exist between priests and players. But as soon as the Theatre claimed to have a voice of its own,—to have its own aims and objects, its own field of enterprise, its own mode of action; that bond was broken. The functions of the Church were found to be different from those of the Theatre; and because their functions were different, the fatal fallacy—which has been, and still is, the cause of so much misunderstanding—sprang at once into existence, that therefore their interests must be opposed.

We have thus seen how the Drama arose within the very bosom of the Church; and how, through nearly five centuries, it remained in a position of decreasing dependence upon its parent institution. We have seen how, in course of time, Church and Theatre began to separate; and how finally, with the secularisation of the Drama, the severance became complete. We shall now see how mere disjunction expanded into antagonism; and how, with the disappearance of the old religious drama, the long and bitter conflict between the Church and the Stage actually began.

Digitized by Google

III.

THE FINAL SEPARATION.

THE gradual secularisation of the drama was first made manifest by the growing popularity of the morality-play, and by the transition from this, through the interlude, to the regular drama. The object of the mystery had been to bring before the people in tangible form the incidents of sacred history and the miracles and martyrdoms of the saints; that of the morality was to convey some great ethical doctrine by means of abstract figures, such as Charity, Chastity, Avarice, &c. Thus far the Stage had failed to find its proper province. It was only when the secular drama sprang into life beneath the manifold influences, intellectual, moral, and spiritual, of the great transition-period in our history, that it discovered where that province lay. Throwing aside the merely dogmatic and didactic aims by which hitherto it had been trammelled, it now for the first time ventured to "hold the mirror up to nature," and to represent the world as it was.

With the opening of this new chapter in dramatic history finally ceased the connection of the Church with the Stage. The Drama had passed through its

Digitized by Google

period of tutelage; and now, standing on the confines of maturity, it demanded the right to speak for itself, to follow its own course, to do its own work in the world. Of the glorious outburst of genius which followed, unequalled perhaps in rapidity and splendour by anything which the literary annals of the world can show, it is unnecessary here to speak. Shakspere was born in 1564; Heywood, the writer of interludes, with whom the secular drama really commenced, died a year later. Scarcely more than thirty years separates the first feeble efforts at genuine comedy and the commencement of Shakspere's marvellous career. During that brief period dramatic art in England rushed into the fulness of its powers. It had discovered its true field of activity; it had realised, what even to-day we are so apt to forget, that the work of the Pulpit and the work of the Stage do not travel along the same lines; that the function of Art is not that of Religion, nor the function of Religion that of Art. Hence, when the great Elizabethan drama ripened to its full, the direct connection of the Church and the Stage was already a thing of the past.

The history of the English Theatre from the establishment of the regular drama to the outbreak of the civil war is largely associated with that of the court. From time to time, it is true, the Stage aroused the displeasure of the civil authorities by its marked political tendencies and its outspoken criticisms of those who were but little accustomed to such familiar treatment. But in the main, during the period of which I write, the drama continued to live in the

Digitized by Google

goodwill and under the protection of the court; and since dramatists, as a rule, responded to royal patronage in a spirit of sympathy and conciliation, no serious breach occurred between protector and *protégé*. It is well to remember this intimate relationship, since it was not without its influence in bringing about the fierce conflict of which I am about to speak.

Far back into the history of the mediæval Church may be traced that spirit of stern and uncompromising opposition to everything that savoured of sacerdotalism, that hatred of ritual, forms, ceremonies, symbols, which was by and by to burst like a storm over the ecclesiastical world. In its earliest manifestations that spirit may be observed in the Lollards of the fifteenth century and the Christian Brethren of the sixteenth; the latter of which sects may be regarded as the direct progenitor of the organised Puritanism of later years. To the opposition of these early reformers to the clerical Drama I have already had occasion to refer. Their spirit of hatred they bequeathed to their descendants, in whose hands the bitter dowry rapidly developed to unforeseen proportions. In the austere plan of life which Puritanism presented to the world there was no place for social excitement, for pleasure of the most innocent kind, for temporary relaxation. Stern and unrelenting fanatics, eaten up with their enthusiasm, and looking at the whole of life through the distorting medium of their own gloomy creed, these grim reformers branded all joy as sin, all beauty as seduction. Art, in all its manifold forms, fell beneath the universal ban; and

Digitized by Google

those who devoted themselves to art were followed, at first with abuse, and afterwards, as the power of Puritanism grew, with more tangible expressions of hostility. Puritanism at its origin meant little more than a theory of Church government; but little by little it developed into a vast system, embracing the whole of life—a system in which hatred of everything which savoured of pleasure held from the beginning a prominent place. To the spread of religious fanaticism among the middle classes must therefore, in the first instance, be referred that hostility to the stage which, as early as the time of Shakspere, was already coming to the front. But before long political animosity came in to aid religious bigotry; and from that time forward Puritanism directed its assaults against the Drama with ever-increasing determination, and players and playwrights alike were early made to realise the fact that the war was one in which compromise would prove of no avail.

No one acquainted with the dramatic literature of the period during which Puritan opposition was thus consolidating and taking definite form, will seek to deny the fact that for that increasing opposition strong reasons may be alleged. The tone of the Stage was fast degenerating. The Drama was not only the outspoken expression of a singularly outspoken age,—of that I should see but small reason to complain; it was rapidly becoming the systematic mouthpiece of the lowest passions of humanity, the mocker of the highest aspirations and the representative of the grossest defects of the age. To

Digitized by Google

realise how early the decadence had set in, and how rapidly it ran its course, one need only read a playwright's opinion of his fellow-playwrights—the judgment of Ben Jonson on his contemporaries in the preface to *Volpone.* The language he there uses is unmistakably distinct. He admits that a great part of the "stage-poetry" of his day is "nothing but ribaldry, profanation, blasphemy;" and his powerful and out-spoken testimony goes far to corroborate the Puritan complaints concerning the Stage. After those words were written the downward tendency became more and more marked—"rare old Ben" himself being drawn away from his early and lofty aims to pander to the low tastes of King James's court; while those who followed him apparently did their best to merit the reprobation which was so plentifully bestowed. Certainly I have no wish to attempt any defence of the later Stuart dramatists. Only let it be remembered that in their wholesale condemnation of the Stage, the Puritans, tempering not their zeal with any semblance of discretion, were guilty of that same short-sightedness which has often been exhibited by well-meaning reformers in more recent years. So far from doing good, their opposition, and especially their method of showing it, only drove the Stage into attitudes of more and more pronounced revolt. To the wild exaggerations and the intense prejudices of the Puritans during the period of their gradual rise into power, I believe that we have to refer many of the worst features of society in the early years of the Restoration. I am not unmindful

Digitized by Google

of the debt of gratitude which we owe to Puritanism and its representatives; nor is it here the place to complain that by their blind and unreflecting policy they did so much to neutralise the good which their courage and consistency had wrought. But in recognising the ethical grounds of their opposition to the contemporary stage, it is well to bear in mind the fact that, however good may have been the reasons for the course of conduct which they pursued, however good may have been their intention in pursuing it, that course was proved by the sequel to have been worse than useless. In the words of Lord Macaulay, "The Puritans boasted that the unclean spirit was cast out. . . . But the force of the exorcism was spent. The fiend returned to his abode;" and taking to himself seven other spirits, "they entered in, and dwelt together: and the second possession was worse than the first."

From the time of Aristophanes the Theatre has always been a dangerous enemy; and in its many conflicts with opponents, civil and religious, it has seldom failed to have something to say in its own behalf. While Puritanism was year by year growing more bitter and violent in its animosity—while it was ranking all dramatic exhibitions below bear-baiting and similar "profane exercises"—while its more zealous exponents were openly and admittedly aiming at a total and permanent closing of the theatres; the Stage was not likely to remain as little moved as an unconcerned looker-on. The feud was one of life and death. The very existence of the Drama was

Digitized by Google

threatened; and in its struggle for self-preservation the Stage only obeyed the strongest instinct of universal nature. Even in Shakspere * and his immediate contemporaries we can already find traces of the reply of the Theatre to Puritan abuse. With the lapse of a few years the language of the Stage passed into open and unrestrained defiance, and from that into violent and coarse vituperation. Contemporary dramatic literature abounds in caricatures of Puritan life,—many of the playwrights drawing the materials for their coarse and exaggerated burlesques from this well-known type of national character. We have but to turn to the works of Jonson, Chapman, Marston, Middleton, and many other obscurer authors, to realise how fiercely and how persistently the Stage avenged itself on its enemies with those old weapons of satire which it has used so often and with so much effect. Ridicule, as we all know, is a bitter test even for the most philosophical; and doubtless the public exhibition of their foibles and extravagances did not tend to soothe the anger of the Puritans, or to break down their prejudices.

If the productions of the contemporary drama furnish us with one side of the question, the other side may be obtained from the long series of volumes and pamphlets with which Puritanism attacked its formidable foe. The work commenced by Gosson, who as far back as 1580 or thereabouts launched the first thunderbolt of rhetoric against "stage-plays," was carried forward in earnest by a long succession of intrepid

* See *Twelfth Night*, ii. 3; *The Winter's Tale*, iv. 2.

Digitized by Google

zealots. Pamphlet after pamphlet made its appearance, the thesis of every one of which, set forth with a great show of Biblical arguments, and with all the eloquence and learning in the writers' power, was the heathenish abomination of the theatre, and the duty of those in authority to deal with it with all the rigour of the law. The characteristic qualities of this paper-cannonade were poverty of logic and wealth of zeal. Texts of Scripture wrested from their plain meaning, and long and tedious dissertations concerning the infernal origin of the Drama, were held sufficient to establish the Puritan views; and of nearly all of these writers it may be said, without fear of contradiction, that if it had depended only upon dearth of argument and violence of abuse to win the reformers' cause, that cause could not have been in better hands.

The great representative and culminating work of the anti-dramatic literature of this period was the famous *Histrio-Mastix, or Actor's Tragœdie*, of William Prynne. This modest little treatise fills a thousand and six closely printed pages, and is, with grim irony, divided into parts, acts, and scenes. It is elaborate in design and solid in matter, and certainly marshals an array of authorities long enough to startle even the boldest disputant. It must be admitted, too, that taken as a whole, it is somewhat more judicial in tone and apposite in reasoning than the majority of works which had preceded it. One fatal complaint against it may, however, be very justly made. The author evidently knew little or nothing about the plays and playhouses of his time;

Digitized by Google

indeed, he seems to have made no pretence to knowledge on this point. He says, without hesitation, that upon his first arrival in London, he "had heard and seene . . . foure severall playes," and there his practical acquaintance with the acted drama would appear to have ceased. This comparative ignorance, however, did not prevent him from calling theatres "devil's chapels," or from roundly asserting that the drama had its origin with the father of all evil.*

Prynne, as is well known, having implicated the queen in his wholesale condemnation of dancing, and otherwise offended the authorities, incurred severe penalties by the publication of this work; but though the author suffered, the book was perhaps not without some effect. Had the times been favourable, we might even have seen traces of its influence in the dramatic literature of the period. But the times were far from favourable. A crisis was even then impending, and all the elaborate argument and fierce invective of Prynne and his brethren were soon lost amid that practical antagonism which, growing in strength with the gradual growth of Puritanism, and culminating with the overthrow of the king's cause, involved the Stage in a sudden ruin which seemed final and complete.†

* It has been said that there are as many as one hundred thousand references, taken from one thousand authors, in this extraordinary book, and that no less than four thousand texts of Scripture are brought up to show the absolute sinfulness of the stage. Truly the work was, as Dominie Sampson would say, "Prodigious!"

† It is interesting to observe that Milton published his *Comus* within a year after Prynne's work first saw the light. Milton, it must be remembered, distinctly repudiated the indiscriminate opposition of

Digitized by Google

This practical opposition had already found ways of expressing itself. Plays had for some time been prohibited on Sundays; and during the continuance of the plague in London in 1637, such performances were suspended altogether. But these were merely premonitions of what the Stage might expect if its great enemy ever came into full possession of the civil power. This, as we all know, happened ere long. In 1642 began the great war; and upon its outbreak theatrical representations were temporarily ordered to "cease and be forborne," because stage plays "do not well agree with the seasons of humiliation." Then Puritanism, finding at length a power of expression through the law of the land, began resolutely to carry out the measures which its writers had so long been urging upon the Government. In 1647 a Parliamentary ordinance gave summary power to magistrates against any players found engaged in exercising their calling; and a year later this was followed by another ordinance, declaring all stage-players to be rogues, and subject to the punishment of rogues, and authorising magistrates to pull down all galleries, seats, and stages, "that so there might be no more plaies acted." This was practically the final blow. The dark days of the Theatre had set in. Though the vitality of the Drama was not entirely stamped out, every effort was made to render the work of destruction complete. Puritanism had at last avenged itself

the Puritans in general to the Stage; and, Puritan as he was, he could have had but little sympathy with the school of thought represented by Prynne.

Digitized by Google

on its great adversary, and the English drama was hurried to its doom. The great fire was virtually quenched; and the few flickering sparks which yet remained can only be discovered by raking among the embers.

Digitized by Google

IV.

PLAYERS AND PURITANS.

With the restoration of royalty in the person of the "Merry Monarch" begins a new chapter in the history of English society and of the English stage. That chapter does not open well. Thirteen years of Puritan ascendancy were followed in the natural order of things by a period of open and unrestrained license. The strenuous attempts which, during the period of the Protectorate, were made to stamp out the most innocent desires of human nature, to destroy all possibility of amusement, to bring in the reign of a grim and unsympathetic asceticism, and to hide the beauty of nature and humanity beneath the pall of a dark creed, are, I believe, to be credited with much of the subsequent moral disorder. As before and since in the history of society, undue restraint, once thrown off, was followed by undue liberty. The forces of life must have free play; human nature will in the end assert itself. The Puritans, with their unhealthy notions of earthly existence, with their stern rules of conduct, and their wild theories concerning the power and function of government, forgot this. They did their best to bind human nature with the

Digitized by Google

narrow bonds of their austere creed; and human nature once having found the opportunity to burst those bonds, avenged itself in a way that was as fearful as it was inevitable.

We must, however, be careful not to assume that the moral reaction which followed the Restoration affected to any very great extent the large masses of the people. With Puritanism in its most pronounced developments the average Englishman had never had much sympathy; but with the essence and spirit of Puritanism he was, and continued to be, in cordial agreement. The restoration of the monarchy and the overthrow of the extreme party affected the milder religionists—that is, the large body of the middle classes—less, perhaps, than is ordinarily supposed. The hurried transition from one extreme to the other could hardly have been effected if the English democracy at large—never, be it remembered, accustomed to sudden changes on questions of such vital importance—had exhibited strongly marked predilections for one or other of the contending parties. The revolution and the counter-revolution may be regarded as principally the work of powerful minorities; and when Charles II. ascended the throne, he was welcomed by many of the more sober of the party to which the founders of the Protectorate had themselves belonged.

But Charles Stuart on his return to England brought with him what these moderate thinkers had little looked for — the unrestrained licentiousness which has made his reign notorious in the annals

Digitized by Google

of our country. In the English court, and among the ruling and upper classes, undisguised sensuality became the order of the day. Charles himself was a libertine, and the friend and patron of libertines; and the one aim of those about him seemed to be to emulate and, if possible, to surpass in wickedness their royal master. Hence followed a period of dissoluteness which has been rightly termed "wild and desperate," and into the details of which we are fortunately not called upon to enter. The important point to remember in connection with our present subject is, that it was of the dissolute aristocracy and not of the sober middle classes that the Stage now became the mouthpiece and the mirror. During its palmy days, in the time of Shakspere and his immediate successors, the Drama had been in the best sense democratic; it had been in close sympathy with the great mass of the people. This was no longer the case. The Stage and the literature of the Stage were now the creatures of one class only of the community; and of that class, the most licentious and the most profane, the Drama became the only too ready representative.* The steady middle-class inhabitants of

* The new theatrical *régime* initiated at the Restoration, bad as it was, was not altogether without its advantages, inasmuch as it permanently introduced actresses to the English stage. As early as 1629 some French women had appeared at Blackfriars Theatre, but the experiment had proved a complete failure; and it was not till after the re-opening of the theatres that it became general for women to play female parts. All important as was this change, alike from an artistic and from a moral point of view, it unfortunately gave rise almost immediately to a practice, the continued survival of which is greatly to be deplored—the practice, namely, of occasionally casting women for male parts: Dryden's prologue to his adaptation of *The Tempest* showing

Digitized by Google

London regarded the theatre as at best a place of very doubtful resort; and so the regular frequenters of the playhouse were mostly those in whose moral characters the glaring defects of the time were very clearly marked. I can only add that the Stage conformed only too readily to the vitiated taste of its patrons.*

Hence we must not look for any revival of the old drama during the reigns of the later Stuarts. The continuity of history had been broken; and in no true sense of the word can the post-Restoration drama be regarded as an offspring even of that relatively degenerate drama which had existed immediately before the closing of the theatres. Fresh influences were at work, and a fresh drama was the result—the

that this custom followed very rapidly upon the regular appearance of women on the stage. It is very important, I think, in the interests of the English theatre, that a determined effort should be made to do away with this objectionable practice, now fortunately limited almost entirely to burlesque and *opera-bouffe*. Of course, I am not now referring to those cases in which the demands of the plot necessitate the assumption by the heroine of a masculine disguise—a device very popular with Shakspere and the older dramatists, and to which no rational objection can be made. But I protest against the senseless practice of filling the parts of princes and pages with female performers —a practice which is as indefensible from an artistic as it is objectionable from a moral point of view.

* The comparative unpopularity of the theatre during this period is a noteworthy fact, the significance of which has been pointed out by Mr. Lecky in the following passage:—"So much has been said of the necessary effect of theatrical amusements in demoralising nations that it is worthy of special notice that there were ten or eleven theatres open in London in the reign of Elizabeth, and a still greater number in the reign of her successor, whereas in the incomparably more profligate reign of Charles II. there were only two. Even these proved too many, and . . . it was found necessary to unite the companies in 1684" (*History of England in the Eighteenth Century*, vol. i. p. 538).

Digitized by Google

Restoration comedy being merely the temporary expression of a state of society which itself could not necessarily be otherwise than temporary. The writings of Wycherley, characterised by an undisguised immorality which is simply astounding (he himself makes one of his characters declare that plays are "filthy, obscene, hideous things");* and after these, the works of Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar, give us a dreadful picture of the state of the Stage, and of the society which supported it, during the period when such plays were performed. Not all the perfection of construction and brilliancy of dialogue by which they were frequently marked were sufficient to hide the moral rottenness which was indeed "the soul of the plot." †

This condition of things continued until 1688. In that year of grace came the Revolution, and with it a change for the better in the court life and in the social life of the time. Under the influence of purer examples, and with the gradual spread of a more refined taste, the glaring profligacy which had made a boast of its own hideousness began to lose ground. The taint, however, still rested upon the Stage, which, being made the last refuge of the retreating immo-

* Olivia in *The Plain Dealer*, act ii., scene 1.

† The condition of the Stage at this time may be understood by recalling the fact that for many years no decent woman would risk appearing at the first performance of a new comedy; and that it was the custom for ladies to attend the theatre masked. Pepys, on June 12, 1663, having seen Lady Mary Cromwell thus protected at the theatre, forthwith went to the Exchange to purchase a "vizard" for his wife. Colley Cibber refers to the practice of wearing masks as one which in his day had "been abolish'd these many years" (*Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber*, 2d ed., 1740, p. 219).

Digitized by Google

rality, responded but slowly to the improved impulses of society. The Theatre, depending for its very existence upon the patronage of that portion of the community which had been the least touched by the changing spirit of the time, still clung tenaciously to many of its old abominations; when, in the year 1698, appeared a book which at once threw the literary world into commotion and stirred dramatic society to the depths—Jeremy Collier's *Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage.*

This work is certainly the most famous, as it is probably the most powerful, of all the many diatribes which the controversy between the Church and the Stage has called into existence. The author was a sturdy and honest non-juror,—a man of great learning and ability, whose unbending devotion to principle during those turbulent times constantly brought him into trouble and disgrace. Unlike the *Histrio-mastix,* his book is still readable; and any one who opens it may convince himself of its straightforward hard-hitting style, and of the well-timed blows which it dealt round unmercifully upon the leading "wits" of the day—the august Dryden himself included. "To compliment Vice," says the robust author, "is but one remove from worshipping the Devil;" and no one looking through the volume will be inclined to think that Collier erred in this respect. The chief complaint against him, indeed, is that he was too keen to detect impropriety—scenting profanity and uncleanness in the most innocent expressions, and gravely reprobating the Stage for its abuse of clergymen and

Digitized by Google

great people. One point deserving of notice is, that he systematically brings up the classical drama to bear witness against that of his own day: the method thus adopted showing that he was not attacking the Stage upon a general principle, but merely the form it had then assumed, and the abuses by which it was defiled. Collier made the mistake of assuming that the fashionable viciousness of his time was directly due to the debasing influence of the contemporary drama. "Being convinc'd," he writes in his preface, "that nothing has gone farther in Debauching the Age than the Stage-Poetry and Play-house, I thought I could not employ my Time better than in Writing against them." A great deal in his book, too, judged by the canons of modern criticism, is trivial in the extreme, and not a little is altogether wide of the mark. But at least Collier was a man in earnest. He had found abuses which deserved attack, and he threw himself heart and soul into his self-imposed task of attacking them. Whatever drawbacks the book may have, it was at least the honest work of an honest man; and if we would do justice to its merits and to the merits of its author, we must avoid being misled by Leigh Hunt's vehement abuse of what he calls the "over-heated zeal" of "this sour, nonjuring critic." If the punishment were somewhat severe, at least the Stage had brought it upon itself; and it is pleasant to think that if the would-be reformer reaped little but abuse, the castigation he had inflicted was not without its beneficial effects.

Indeed, the *Short View* is one of the few books

Digitized by Google

of invective that have produced a marked and lasting impulse in the right direction. It dropped like a thunderbolt into the dramatic world. Dryden bitterly felt the attack upon himself; but at first tacitly, and afterwards implicitly, admitted that he had deserved it. Congreve and Vanbrugh made feeble and ill-considered replies, which only brought down upon them pulverising rejoinders from their opponent. The better feelings of the great mass of the English people were upon the reformer's side; the comic poets who had been made the subjects of attack, though beyond the reach of any actual reformation, still bore unwilling testimony to the reality of the change that was setting in. From this point we may mark the turn of the tide. Society had grown weary of the barefaced immorality of the Restoration. A reaction had set in; and of this reaction Collier had become the mouthpiece and exponent. For the first time for many years it became possible for a man to be at once a gentleman and an honest man; infraction of the seventh commandent was no longer considered an essential condition to the favourable regard of society; while the wives who respected their characters, and the husbands who held sacred their vows, ceased to be looked upon as necessarily objects of derision and contempt. These marked changes in the state of society after the Revolution were presently mirrored in the dramatic literature of the time. The race of Restoration dramatists, whose work, unrelated to the Drama which had preceded it, was also happily without any marked influence on that by which it was followed,

Digitized by Google

was succeeded by a generation of playwrights who set themselves in earnest to the task of driving profanity and lawlessness from the Stage. Writers like Mrs. Centlivre, like Colley Cibber in his later productions, like Steele (who indeed mistook the purpose of comedy, and failed accordingly),* did much to bring the drama to a higher level than it had occupied since the re-opening of the theatres. And though here and there we come upon a brief period of retrogression, we may regard the commencement of the eighteenth century as the beginning of better things. For from that time onward may be traced a slow but well-marked progress in the tone and tendencies of the English stage, a growing recognition on the part of actors and authors of their responsibilities and their duties, and a consequent appreciable, though unequal, movement of dramatic art towards its rightful position in social life.

How did the Church respond to these new aspirations of the Drama? Did she, realising that at length the prodigal had become ashamed of the past, stretch out the hands of assistance? Did she hasten with the word of encouragement to playwrights and players when they threw themselves into the good work of reform? Did she cast aside the antagonism which she had till lately had such good reason to exhibit, and welcome every small improvement as an earnest

* In Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (Book iii., chap. xi.), Parson Adams is made to say—"I have never heard of any plays fit for a Christian to read but 'Cato' and the 'Conscious Lovers' [by Steele]; and, I must own, in the latter there are some things almost solemn enough for a sermon." Steele, indeed, fell into the error of mistaking the stage for the pulpit.

Digitized by Google

of greater improvement in the future? Unfortunately we must answer these questions in the negative. The time had come when, had the juster counsels of conciliation prevailed, the wide breach between these two great institutions might have been presently closed. But the opportunity passed unimproved. The Church does not readily adapt itself to new conditions, or realise the necessity of adjusting its action to the changing needs of the time. The dark line of demarcation once having been drawn between the Church and the Stage, neither justice nor policy could now induce the former to wipe that line away.

This was a critical point in the history of the English stage—the point at which indeed the feud between Religion and the Drama entered upon its modern phase. It is, therefore, important that we should understand the various factors of the problem as it existed at that time. To do this we must fix our attention upon the Church, and upon the causes which led to the policy pursued by her; for it was upon her that there then rested the onus of responsibility.

Looking back at the drama of the Restoration, and realising its gross immorality and its systematic pandering to the lowest tastes of a debased society, we can understand, nay, we can in a large measure sympathise with the stern attitude of hostility taken up by the religious thinkers of the time. They did not seek for measures of slow reform; they did not endeavour to prune away the evil and develop the good; they lacked alike the will to attempt and the patience to achieve the purification of an institution

Digitized by Google

so utterly corrupt as the Stage. They were here as elsewhere iconoclasts pure and simple; here as elsewhere their war was a war of extermination. Hence their attitude of unrelenting defiance—an attitude explained, and to a large extent justified, by the moral condition of the society in which they lived, and of the Stage, which was its only too faithful representative. Thus far, then, we can both understand and appreciate the Puritan position. But time went on; the moral tone of the age underwent a gradual change; and the Stage, which, as a condition of its existence, must sooner or later find the average moral tone of its surroundings, began to respond to the new impulses which were passing through society. All was changing—except the Church. She still persisted in her opposition; she still repeated the old arguments; she still launched forth her anathemas and pronounced her curses. Why? Because the Stage, having once been rightly identified with the worst phases of a vicious society, had acquired a mark of sin. Henceforth its fate was sealed; no effort at improvement met with recognition or response. The Church distinctly refused to help it to rise; yet the Church was never weary of abusing it because it was down. This was the Christian charity, the justice, the common-sense, of the religious party of the time. The sons of thunder made their churches ring with denunciations, careless though the enormities they were denouncing were fast becoming things of the past; pious people shrugged their shoulders, and nasally repeated their platitudes, heedless of the fact that their statements

Digitized by Google

were generally misleading and often absolutely false. The Church clings to her old prejudices, and ever refuses to recall as unjust to-day the censure she justly pronounced yesterday. Hence when she entered into a heritage of bitter antagonism to the Stage, she did not pause to inquire whether that antagonism was still well-founded; or whether the matter at issue between herself and her traditionary foe was not rapidly becoming a thing of the past. It was nothing to her that she was visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children, who, if not yet entirely faultless, were at any rate doing their best to throw off the hereditary taint. She simply accepted the family feud, and carried it on with unabated animosity.

So it was that just at the time when the Theatre entered upon a period of earnest reform, the Church on her side consolidated her antagonism and made it an article of her creed. Henceforth, in every effort towards amendment, the Stage had a double difficulty to contend with—the difficulty always attendant upon every effort to rise from the lower to the higher; and the difficulty which was now thrown deliberately in the way by those who should have been the first to encourage and assist. Every practical movement in the direction of a higher moral tone in the plays produced, and in the theatres themselves, has therefore come directly and immediately from the Stage itself,—one actor, Garrick, doing more to elevate the Drama than all the priests and Puritans who have ever lived; and what is still more significant, every such movement has been made in the face of the very institution

Digitized by Google

which professes to be the moral leader of the people. This preposterous state of things has continued with but little modification from that day to this: a slight reaction in favour of the Theatre noticeable during the early part of the eighteenth century, being followed by the revived opposition which became marked after the rise of Methodism. Had the Church realised her responsibilities and done her duty, these papers, if written at all, would have been no more than antiquarian essays. As it is, the facts may be thus summed up:—That the Stage to-day stands so high as it does, the Stage itself is to be commended; that it stands no higher, the Church is mainly to be blamed.

Digitized by Google

V.

THE PRESENT POSITION OF THE CONTROVERSY.

BEARING in mind the facts set forth in the last chapter, we shall not now have much difficulty in realising in what condition the Church-and-Stage question came down to our own times. I do not think that any one reading that chapter will accuse me of undue partisanship. I have not tried to palliate the manifold vices of the Stage during the period of the Restoration; I have not, like Leigh Hunt and Charles Lamb, sought excuses for its immorality; I have not endeavoured to throw the cloak of specious reasoning over its grossness, its profanity, its filth. I am free to admit that the Stage has come down to our own times with the curse of two centuries of corruption still clinging to it; and I am convinced, moreover, that the knowledge of this one fact will help us in no small measure to understand the attitude of the modern Church towards the modern Stage.

That attitude, so strange in the light of the present, becomes comprehensible in the light of the past. The opposition of the religious classes—of those, that is,

Digitized by Google

who make a special profession of religion—to the Drama, is almost wholly a traditional opposition. They have taken it, as they take so much else, on simple faith; it has come down to them from the past with their creeds and ceremonies, and they accept it as a matter of course. Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that to the religious classes a hundred and fifty years ago the Stage seemed rotten to the core and incapable of amelioration; that, looking at the problem calmly and dispassionately (as religious people are accustomed to do), they saw good reason to believe that they would render a greater service to society by leaving the Stage to its corruption than by exerting themselves for its elevation and reform,—how, it may be asked, can their decision a hundred and fifty years ago affect the decision of independent men and women dealing with the problems of the present day? At first sight the answer would seem to be—In no way whatever. Yet it is important to understand that it is really upon the conduct of the old Puritans that the conduct of their modern representatives is based. The Church, which is too often only the strong hand by which the past holds the present and the dead rule the living, has sent down its grim heirloom of traditions; and among those traditions, uncompromising opposition to dramatic art in every form takes a prominent place. It matters not that times have changed—that "new occasions teach new duties"—that a course of conduct which yesterday might be justified is without the shadow of justification to-day. The Stage has inherited a bad

Digitized by Google

reputation; and the Church, nursing its hatred as it nurses its time-worn creeds, persists in accepting the evidence of the past concerning the things of the present; thus, in answer to every argument and every appeal, merely repeating the empty shibboleths of a generation which has passed away.

It might at first sight appear a little curious that the Church should so obstinately continue to speak of the Theatre to-day in terms of the worst abuses which have ever defiled it in the past: thus practically declining to recognise even the remote possibility of amendment. But it must be remembered that society at large is very slow to believe in amendment of any kind; and that even Christian society shows a marked reluctance to carry its own theories of conversion into the arena of practical daily life. It is the old story of giving a dog a bad name. The Stage contracted defilement, and straightway the Church declares it to be beyond the limits of reform; it sank into the depths of impurity, and the Church condemns it as incapable of elevation. Because it has fallen into the gutter, *therefore* the gutter is its proper place; because it has been begrimed with dirt, *therefore* it is naturally and irretrievably black. The singular cogency of this reasoning is only equalled by the exquisitely Christian spirit which runs through it. One can only wonder how it would fare with Christianity itself if we met it with reasoning of this kind; for nowhere can we read the story of corruption more clearly than in the annals of the Christian Church. Yet the Church conveniently chooses to forget with how much

D

Digitized by Google

bitter truth we might turn upon it with the satirist's words—*Mutato nomine, de te fabula narratur!* Acting upon ancient tradition, it has done all within its power to prevent the Stage from throwing off the stain by which it has so long been cursed. Since the Church will not alter its language to suit the changing facts, the facts have to be garbled to suit the unchanging language: the majority of those who abuse the Theatre the most persistently being confessedly ignorant of the subject, and, like Mr. Croaker, only deigning to listen to the testimony of the better informed when they have so firmly made up their minds that they feel no risk of perversion. And so the familiar platitudes are repeated *ad nauseam*, and evangelical enthusiasts continue manfully to fight the ghosts of things which we may well hope can never exist again.

In dealing with the present phase of this long quarrel, one is forced, therefore, to confess that the spirit of religious opposition to dramatic art is still very strong.* But it should be remarked that as a

* To show how readily the religious classes will seize hold of any point that may be turned to the detriment of the stage, I may mention here an incident which occurred not long ago. In the *Fortnightly Review* for January 1885, Mr. F. C. Burnand, stern moralist and writer of burlesques, published a very unnecessary article entitled "Behind the Scenes." His animadversions on the dramatic profession were eagerly seized hold of by one of the most liberal of our religious papers, which published a leading article upon them. Shortly afterwards Mr. Toole, in an address delivered before the Brechin Dramatic Club, made a manly and straightforward reply to Mr. Burnand's remarks. I cut out a condensed report of his address and sent it to the said paper, remarking that as the editor had given great publicity to Mr. Burnand's statements, he might think it only just to do as much for the testimony of so high an authority as Mr. Toole. Of course no notice was ever taken

Digitized by Google

rule this opposition is no longer exhibited in the old outspoken way. Positive attacks upon the Theatre grow fewer every year. Here and there an enthusiast of the more pronounced type may be found exhibiting his zeal and exposing his ignorance; but generally speaking, so far as I have been able to observe, the aggressive policy is at present far from popular. The position of the Church to-day is one rather of negative than of positive antagonism. Active opposition is fast being relinquished, but as yet it is not replaced by active co-operation and support. The silence of the religious world at large in face of the immense dramatic activity of the time is a most significant sign. Judging only from the sermons preached in London, for instance, on any Sunday, one might readily suppose that no such thing as a theatre exists in the metropolis; or, if one exist, that its influence as a social force is so small that there is no need to pay it any attention. The Church to-day ignores the Stage as much as possible. The policy of the past is beginning to seem too much like an anachronism; the policy of the future is not yet formulated. Hence silence is the easiest way out of the difficulty; and for the present things are allowed pretty much to take their own course. That this modified form of expressing antagonism really implies an important change of position, we may see by looking in other directions. The silent influences

of either extract or letter; and many who had been carefully informed of Mr. Burnand's accusations, were thus as carefully left in ignorance of Mr. Toole's reply.

Digitized by Google

of the time have not been without their result. Many of the old prejudices are already disappearing at the touch of a broader culture; and though intolerance is fighting inch by inch for the ground it has held so long, there is comfort for us in believing that its ranks grow thinner as the years pass by. As yet the influences of the more healthy spirit which, I believe, is gaining ground among us, are not so perceptible as we could have wished in regard to the Drama itself; but we need only look elsewhere to convince ourselves of the reality of the progress that is being made. The opposition of the Church to dramatic art must logically base itself on opposition to pleasure in general—the broad ground taken must be that all amusement is in itself wrong. Upon that ground, in the past, the Church in fact stood. Those who opposed the Drama did so because they held that there was something sinful in all recreation, and that temptation lurked in whatever tended to temporarily relieve the grim austerity of life and distract the attention from the contemplation of death and eternity. Hence, consistently enough, those who attacked the Drama attacked also art in every form, and branded with the same brand everything that ministered to pleasure. The religious classes to-day are not so fiercely consistent. The social gatherings and entertainments of various kinds, now common with all our religious bodies, show how surely the old asceticism is breaking away. Little by little the Puritan outer crust is wearing off, allowing the human feeling beneath it to disclose itself. The broad ground of the essential sin-

Digitized by Google

fulness of all pleasure is already abandoned; and as a necessary outcome of this we may observe a modification in the attitude adopted towards much that was formerly proscribed as belonging only to the world. The late Mr. Trollope's *Autobiography* bears ample testimony to the change which has been coming over average middle-class ideas of prose fiction during the last fifty years. In that change we may see an encouraging sign. The novel, since its wide popularity is of comparatively recent growth, has been able to stand largely upon its own merits unhampered by any traditionary curse; and it has thus been in a favourable condition to receive the full force of that strong and healthy movement which the broader sympathies and wider culture of the present generation have combined to set on foot. Of that movement the Drama has as yet been touched only by the fringe. But when we remember that what is now urged against the Drama was not long ago urged equally against prose fiction in general, and that to-day almost every one reads novels, and no one is ashamed of doing so, we can hardly doubt that the change which is already perceptible in the attitude of the Church towards dramatic art, slight though it may be, is the sure sign that for the Theatre also has commenced a new and brighter chapter of its history.

There are men who are the delegates of the past to the present—the religious bigots and the social tyrants who still in our churches and parliaments repeat the sentiments of two centuries ago. Happily, however, the future, too, has its representatives; and these

Digitized by Google

are the men who boldly stand forth to preach doctrines which it will take the rank and file a full century to grasp. If within the Church there are many who are doing their utmost to keep alive the ancient blood-feud between Religion and dramatic art, let us at least do justice to the few who, from their places as ministers of religion, have not hesitated to attack the bigotry or apathy of their brethren. The noble words which many of these have spoken for the Theatre,—the efforts they have made to rouse those within the range of their influence,—the unhesitating way in which some of them have borne the opprobrium which their conduct has brought down upon their heads; entitle them to our sincere respect. To their conduct we may thankfully turn for additional evidence that the change of which I have spoken has really set in. What the few preach to-day the many may accept to-morrow; and friends of the Drama may surely find their greatest satisfaction in the fact that words in its defence—words, too, of no uncertain sound—have already gone forth from some among the recognised ministers of the Gospel.

Such seems to be the present attitude of the Church. Turning to the Stage, we may rejoice to find unmistakable evidences of an earnest desire to cut free from all the vicious connections of the past. The Theatre to-day realises its responsibilities as, it is safe to say, it has never realised them heretofore. Much has been, and much continues to be written, upon the decadence in the literary merits of our modern plays. Into that question there is no need for us to enter here. But

Digitized by Google

whatever may be their merits or demerits judged simply from the standpoint of art, I am quite certain that, judged from the standpoint of ethics, they are incomparably higher in tone and purer in teaching than the large mass of plays produced during any previous period in the history of the modern Drama. Taken as a whole, their moral tone is far superior to that of the average prose fiction of the day;* while, if anything, our higher-class plays may, I think, be justly criticised as being too consciously didactic in their aim. The Theatre is, indeed, working hard to answer the accusations of the religious world in the most noble and practical way—by showing that the alleged abuses are without foundation in fact. It is making a praiseworthy attempt to throw off the inheritance handed down to it from the past, and to merit, even while it does not obtain, the recognition and the support of religious society. It is undoubtedly true that, among those who are largely responsible for the present and the future of the Stage, there are, as in every other profession, men who are throughout the whole of their careers influenced only by motives the reverse of high. There are managers who are time-servers; who worship only success; and who, to achieve success, will willingly pander to the tastes of any portion of the public to which they can

* This has occurred before. "The most important feature in these plays [of Goldsmith and Sheridan], as serving to reflect light on the character of the age, is their superior purity to those of our earliest dramatists" (*Pictorial History of England*, vol. v. p. 647). Yet prose fiction during the same period was represented by the works of Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne.

Digitized by Google

look for support. But, on the other hand, there are managers, both in the metropolis and in the provinces, who are engaged in the noble work of raising their art to its just position—of purging it from evil and cleansing it from evil surroundings—of bringing it into closer and closer sympathy with the aspirations of the better part of society; who, in a word, are doing their best to make the Theatre a national institution for good. In these efforts they are seconded by a large and increasing number of men and women who, while devoting their lives to the long-ostracised profession, are using their influence to bring that profession into wider and more genuine respect. There is much still that is put upon the stage, from time to time, to which exception may be taken; for managers, after all, are but human, and the tastes for which they cater are as wide and mixed as is society itself. But the general movement is unmistakably an upward one; and considering the large number of theatres in London alone, and the many thousands they nightly draw within their walls, the general healthiness and purity of the plays presented, from the most solemn tragedy down to the flimsiest farce, is a fact which does not receive the attention it deserves. I look upon it as a most hopeful sign. In the past, when Puritans poured forth their volumes of grim invective, the Stage answered with raillery and abuse; to-day, when ministers of the Gospel repeat the old anathemas, the Stage replies with the nobler language of practical reform. The position of the Theatre is one of conciliation; and if the long conflict is not brought to a speedy termina-

Digitized by Google

tion, the fault will not rest with the Drama or its representatives.

So far, then, as it is possible to generalise, we are safe in saying that the signs of the times are not unhopeful. Managers, authors, and actors are beginning more and more to realise the immense possibilities of their art; and with this realisation comes the growing recognition of the importance of the Drama as a factor in social life, and of their duties and responsibilities towards society at large. Their efforts to raise the Stage into a condition more worthy of the support of educated and refined men and women, their endeavours to provide the public with the means of hearty and healthy recreation, are meeting with daily increasing recognition from portions of that public to which in the past managers would have felt it useless to appeal. The pits of their houses are to-day filled with many who, a generation ago, would never have thought of entering a theatre; and a larger proportion of those who are regularly in their places in our churches and chapels on Sunday mornings, are not ashamed of being seen enjoying a comedy the night before. More especially may the Drama look to the rising generation for sympathy and support. Our young men and women, growing up untrammelled by many of the lingering superstitions and traditionary prejudices from which it is so hard for the elders among us to shake themselves wholly free, and breathing the relatively healthy intellectual atmosphere of the time, are breaking through the old restraints and refusing

Digitized by Google

any longer to credit the reasoning which would make Religion the foe of honest amusement and rational recreation. This is particularly reassuring; for the future is in the hands of the young men and women of the present. But against all these hopeful signs we have to place the undeniable fact that the marked progress which the Stage has made during recent years has not been recognised and appreciated to any considerable extent by the great religious public at large. For this reticence I have already assigned a reason which goes far to explain it—the power of traditional prejudices. To this, among other assignable causes, must be added the fact that the Church knows well how much easier it is to abuse than it is to correct. Vituperation is cheap—especially when one is at liberty to manufacture one's facts; reform costs time, labour, patience. Hence the religious public finds that the simplest way to satisfy its conscience is to inveigh against or to ignore what it steadily refuses to take earnestly in hand; soothing itself with the pleasant belief that by this means it may shirk its responsibility and avoid an unwelcome task.

It will not long, I think, be able to satisfy itself and society by this feeble course. The world at large will in the future demand more from the Church in the way of practical help and counsel in daily need than the Church has ever given in the past; and if the help and the counsel are not forthcoming, it will not be satisfied by elaborate theologies and incomprehensible creeds. If the Church wishes to retain and

Digitized by Google

to strengthen its hold upon the people—or if, more correctly speaking, it wishes ever to get that hold—it will have to cease to draw round itself the magic circle of its own sanctity. It will have to enter the arena of practical life. It will have to adapt itself more than it is at present doing to the conditions and the necessities of the time; it will have to widen its doors and open its windows for the free air of heaven; it will have to give up what Professor Mahaffy has termed "its stern and gaunt devoutness," and deal with the world as something more than a dismal vale of tears inhabited only by millions of wretched worms. It will find it no longer possible to pass over the question of the Theatre in studied silence or with a passing word of abuse. The time for this conduct has gone by. The Church must give up "fighting extinct Satans," and face in a practical manner the practical problems of the day. The Theatre exists in our midst as a social fact; it fills a large and an increasing place in society; it exercises an almost incalculable influence for good or for evil. The time has come when we may fairly ask the Church,—"What do you propose to do? Are you prepared, in the face of all that has been done during the past few years, to deny that the Theatre might be made a most powerful educational and moral agency in society? If you deny it your own indifference condemns you,—your own silence proclaims your weakness. But if you admit that it might be made all that we allege, then why do you stand aloof? why do you shirk your duty with these great interests at

Digitized by Google

stake? why do you play the coward to the Stage which you have already wronged so much, and to the society which expects so much of you?"

These questions are coming more and more to the front; and they are questions which demand a straightforward and decided answer.

Digitized by Google

VI.

THE OUTLOOK.

In passing under review some of the most salient features in the history of the quarrel between the Church and the Stage, we have been enabled to trace the gradual growth of that spirit of antagonism to all dramatic art which has so long been characteristic of the religious world at large. While the Drama, still in its infancy, remained practically under the control of the Church, the opposition with which it met was mainly confined to a scattered few. But when, with the secularisation of the Drama, the final separation took place, the antagonism of the Church to the Theatre soon became violent and general; and with the accession to power of the Puritan party, hostility to dramatic art passed into an article of the current creed. To the gradual spread of Puritan ideas of life and conduct through almost the whole of religious society we owe that long-standing and universal horror of plays and playhouses which still distinguishes the evangelical classes in general. The controversy has been long and bitter, and has often been conducted in such a manner as to reflect little credit on either of the parties engaged. To-day we may see signs

Digitized by Google

of a coming change; and looking round us we feel justified in saying that if the conflict is as yet far from its close, it has at least passed through its most acute phases. Though the asceticism which in varying degrees marked all the higher ethical systems of the past, still retains a strong hold of large portions of the religious public, it is none the less passing away; and though its vitality is still exhibited in the obstinate antagonism of the modern Church to the modern Theatre, the modified form of that antagonism marks its gradual decline. Here as elsewhere, of course, there are and will continue to be reactionists; but the movements initiated by these must be regarded merely as eddies in the stream. Great satisfaction may at least be found in the facts that the old theological positions are fast being abandoned by the more cultured religious thinkers; and that the men and women of the rising generation, while doubtless they will have faults enough of their own to answer for, promise to be tolerably free from many of those old restraints and prejudices which proved so harmful in the past.

There is good ground to hope, therefore, that another generation will see a notable change in the social position of the Stage. By that time we may anticipate that the Church will realise more clearly than it does at present these three important points —first, that the Theatre is a necessary fact in social life; secondly, that there is absolutely no need to deplore the impossibility of destroying it; but that, thirdly, under favourable conditions, it might become

Digitized by Google

an institution of the greatest moral and intellectual importance, and the strong ally of the Church itself. In closing these papers in all hope for the future that is before us, it may be well for a moment to look at each of these points a little more carefully.

The Drama has its root in one of the strongest instincts of human nature. Back into the very lowest forms of savage life (to say nothing here of the same instinct in brutes), may be traced that love of imitation which, among almost all peoples who have reached a civilised state, has eventuated in some kind of dramatic exhibition. Histrionic amusement in one shape or another is an almost universal trait of societies otherwise varying to the utmost extent; while wherever among ancient or modern peoples a condition of fair æsthetic culture has been reached, there the Drama has always filled a prominent place. The Stage would seem to be the spontaneous outgrowth of the most dissimilar soils, drawing its nutrition, no matter what may be the particular form of social life under which it develops, directly from human nature itself. Nor is this all. The instinct for imitation, which is one of the first to show itself in the lowest phases of human life, is also the most pronounced in the highest developments of civilisation. Savage and cultured, the child and the grown-up man, alike bear witness to its strength. Of this instinct the Theatre is the natural, normal, and inevitable outcome. But let it not be supposed that there is not ample evidence of its existence and its strength outside the enormous popularity of the Drama itself. Everywhere and

Digitized by Google

among all classes at the present day is such evidence to be found in abundance; and it is particularly instructive to observe how plentifully it is furnished by the very people who are loudest in their condemnation of the Stage. A consummate platform performer, like the late John B. Gough, who was more an actor than an orator, will draw crowds to hear him; readings from Shakspere by a retired actress in a public hall will be extensively patronised by the religious world; operatic concerts given by singers in evening dress will attract hundreds of those who would shudder at the idea of hearing the same performers sing the same music in appropriate garb and with appropriate scenery. Who needs to be reminded of the extensive patronage which is given by the religious public to semi-dramatic performances like those of Mr. and Mrs. German Reed? Who needs to be told of the pious crowds that frequent the delectable entertainments of Messrs. Moore and Burgess? The writer knows for a fact that dramatic performances pure and simple are given in entertainments held in connection with churches and chapels at the present day—the odour of profanity being removed by having them announced under the euphemistic title of "charades." And it is no less a fact that many religious people will witness with delight the performance of a play in the opera-room of the Crystal Palace who would not think of seeing the same play given by the same company at a theatre in the West End. I do not pause here to animadvert on the wretched hypocrisy exhibited in such conduct as this, nor will

Digitized by Google

I do more than suggest in passing that respectable people in search of entertainment might spend their time to far better purpose in a good theatre than in patronising the generally third-rate performances which are provided for their diversion. What I here wish to point out is, that even those who oppose the Drama bear ample testimony to the strength of the dramatic instinct. As that instinct is an inevitable fact of human nature, so the Theatre, its normal outcome, is an inevitable fact of social life. It exists among us, though religious people may find it convenient to shut their eyes to its presence; it will continue to exist so long as human nature remains human nature and human life keeps its essential traits. Deplore it or not as we may, here it remains, stubborn, inevitable, and indestructible.

For those who look facts boldly in the face, and who will therefore realise the truth of what I have just written, it will be gratifying to be able to think that there is no need whatever to deplore the inevitableness of the Theatre. The feelings with which we regard the Drama as a general fact, apart from any particular forms under which it may manifest itself, must depend entirely upon the view we take of the question of amusement at large. If it can be proved that the grim Puritan conception of life is the true one—if it is best for men and women to go through the world treating it simply as a gloomy vestibule to an eternity which, for most of us, will be an eternity of torment—if whatever tends to beautify life is necessarily dangerous—if honest laughter and honest sympathy are

Digitized by Google

sinful—and if it is wrong to allow the mind to dwell, however briefly, on matters not connected with the awful problems of death and the hereafter; then we must condemn the Stage, as we must condemn art in every form. But I think there are few to-day who will venture to adopt the ground so consistently held by the Puritan fanatics of the past. We know that bodily and mentally we have need of recreation; that without it in each case there is feebleness and disease; that the man who does not occasionally unbend his faculties is not therefore the more, but distinctly the less, capable of doing the serious work of life. That this is true, physically and mentally, few I imagine will now undertake to deny. Body and mind alike need change. Nature demands it; and like the tyrant that she is, visits with severe punishment those who will not obey her law.

All defence of the Stage, as of novel-reading or of other forms of mental relaxation, must commence with the enunciation of the broad principle of the absolute necessity of pleasure. It will not then be difficult to show that of all varieties of intellectual amusement, that afforded by the Theatre is incomparably the best. Social in its character; cosmopolitan in its sympathies; appealing alike to every class of the community—to old and young, to rich and poor alike; the Theatre has advantages possessed by no other form of entertainment; while its fascination is admitted by its most pronounced opponents—is, indeed, urged by them as one of its dangers. A danger it would certainly be if they could show that on the

Digitized by Google

average the influence of the Stage is a degrading one. But they cannot show this. On the contrary, the influence of the Stage, even as it exists to-day, is on the whole beneficial. The mention of this leads us at once to our third point—the ethical power of the Stage, and its functions as an educational factor in social life.

The main want in society all along has been and still is, want of sympathy. "The pest of society," says Emerson, "is egotism." Were our human sympathies wider and stronger than they are, much that we most deplore in the world would pass away as a matter of course. The ability to feel with and for the men and women around us—this is what we require more urgently than parliamentary enactments, or philosophical theories, or elaborate creeds. But unfortunately we all of us live in partial isolation. The best of us can rarely touch, even in their highest moments, the wide interests of universal humanity; while for the average man, the possibilities of vivid fellow-feeling are bounded by the narrow limits of his own lot. Himself, his family, the few with whom he daily meets and converses—these at most are all that ever enter into his calculations. For what passes beyond the confines of his actual acquaintanceship, how should he care? Ruin and misfortune, disaster and death, in all their manifold forms, are busy around him; but he passes on through life virtually cut off from those whom he nevertheless calls his fellow-creatures, shut up in his narrow circle and practically separated from all that lies beyond.

Digitized by Google

The dangers arising from this state of things are exacerbated rather than assuaged by the necessary conditions of modern life. In the material civilisations of the present day, in which the struggle for existence is keener perhaps than it has ever been before, and in which the adulation that is given to mere worldly success leads men to aim at that by all means within their power, the conditions are singularly unfavourable for the development of the finer feelings. Men whose sympathies at the best of times are feeble and imperfect, are rendered still more selfish and callous by the hard race for wealth and fame and position which goes on in all our great centres of civilisation at the present day. What has always been required, and what is required imperatively now, is a power to take men out of themselves and their limited circle of life—a power to strengthen the sympathies and widen the affections; and to do this is, I contend, the true ethical function of all art.

Consider for a moment upon what the faculty of sympathy is based. Is it not founded directly upon the imagination? The selfish man is the man who is unable to represent vividly to himself the thoughts and feelings, the joys and sorrows of others. We can only sympathise with what we can picture to ourselves; and inability to feel for another simply means inability to grasp, by means of the imagination, the experiences through which that other is passing. Mr. Ruskin states the case strongly, but not too strongly, when he says:—"An unimaginative person can neither be reverent nor kind. . . . The

Digitized by Google

imaginative power always purifies; the want of it, therefore, as essentially defiles"—or, more properly speaking, leaves in a defiled condition.* If this be so, it would be hard to over-rate the power and influence of art. It is art that supplements the inevitable imperfections of life; it is art that appeals to and strengthens the imaginative and therefore sympathetic side of our nature; it is art that by enlarging the scope of our observation of life and men and nature, gives our sympathies a wider field of action, and brings us into contact with the outlying world. As George Eliot said in her essay on Riehl, "Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot."

If it is the grand moral function of art, by strengthening and widening the imagination, to enlarge the faculty of sympathy and give to men the power of feeling joys and sorrows other than their own, then I have no hesitation in saying that among all the forms in which the artistic energy finds expression, on its purely ethical side the Drama stands undoubtedly first. If of art in general it is true that it is the nearest thing to life, of dramatic art in particular is it true. Painting and poetry and sculpture have each their special advantages; but none of these is so intensely human as the Drama; none appeals so directly or so powerfully to the feelings; none brings us into such close contact with the world of our fellow-men.

* *Fors Clavigera*, Letter xxxiv.

Digitized by Google

When Crabbe spoke of the pleasure men feel in going to the theatre

> "To steal a few enchanted hours away
> From self,"

he little knew how truly he was describing the ethical influence of dramatic art. "The main use of works of fiction, and of the drama," writes Mr. Ruskin in the letter from which I have already quoted, "is to supply, as far as possible, the defect of . . . imagination in common minds." By what other means, indeed, can the defect be so well supplied? The Drama presents life to us in all its varying forms with a vividness impossible elsewhere outside of life itself. The men and women move and act, think and speak, love and hate, fail and conquer, upon the mimic stage, as the men and women do whom daily we meet and shake by the hand. The marvellous insight of Shakspere lays bare the inmost secrets of human hearts—the struggles and the failures, the yearning hopes, the awful despair, which are hidden beneath the rude exteriors of common men; and as we watch the life-history unfold itself before us, the smile that quivers round the lips, the tear that starts to the eye, the warm blood that rushes to the cheek, all bear witness to the subtle power which for the time enchains and fascinates, and touches at its will the sacred chords of human sympathy and love. To all art belongs in some degree this mighty power; to dramatic art alone it is given in its fullest extent. So long as men retain an interest in their common humanity, so long will the Drama remain an indestructible factor in

Digitized by Google

social life; and so long as men have need of sympathy and reverence and love, so long, happily, will dramatic art fulfil its ministry as the great educator of the emotional side of our nature.

I do not think the Church of the future will feel it just or politic longer to estrange so powerful an ally. The religious classes, as a whole, have too long placed themselves in a false position with regard to dramatic art. They have blindly refused to realise its moral power; they have done their best to thrust it into an attitude of pronounced opposition to their own sentiments; they have withheld their influence, and have shut their eyes to the consequences which were likely to follow their ill-advised conduct. It is not their fault that the modern Drama is not as powerful for evil as it might be potent for good; it is not their fault that the tremendous influence of the Stage is not to-day perverted to deplorable ends. Surely the time has now come when a more just and rational policy should prevail; and those who take the lead in preaching the gospel of conciliation will be conferring one of the greatest benefits upon mankind. Let the war-hatchet be buried once and for ever. Let Church and Stage confess that they have often dealt unfairly with each other in the past, and have mistaken each other's aims. Then, at last, we may look forward to a time when Religion and the Drama, purified from all the corruption by which they have both so long been cursed, may work side by side in the world, to elevate and enlighten, to bless and beautify mankind.

Printed by Ballantyne, Hanson & Co., Edinburgh and London.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google